

Candlemas 2015 – The gift of years

Have you got your pencils read? Eyes down for our next game of sabbatical bingo...

Well, last Autumn when I was in Wales, walking the North Wales Pilgrims Way, on my sabbatical, I discovered that Wales was very hilly - even the flatter parts. For the first few days I was walking up over one ridge, down to the valley below, and up over the next ridge.

It was all quite hard work, but you did gradually get a feel for the landscape. You began to feel the shape of the hills, and the sweep of the rivers, you had a sense of where you had come from - looking back from a viewpoint over the route you had travelled up to now - and looking ahead to what was coming in several days' time.

This sense of being part of the landscape is a particular joy to me - knowing where I am in it, feeling part of it, often especially as I stand on a hillside looking out. It can become a sort of spiritual sense of belonging to something greater.

You can look at our lives as a sort of landscape that we walk through... sometimes feeling we are at a high point - sometimes feeling stuck in a deep valley - at times looking back to see the shape of our lives in the past - at times looking ahead, in uncertainty or expectation.

One of the factors that leads to us feeling more content or more troubled, is how comfortable we are, standing at this particular point in the landscape of our lives. The place we find ourselves in just now.

It's a particular challenge as we get older in life. I have lost count of the number of people who have said to me 'Don't ever get old, Simon - it isn't much fun' - although we often go on to agree that the alternative is worse.

My training Vicar used to say that life is a process of letting go. When you feel that you have let go of your youth, your health and maybe some precious parts of your life, it isn't easy to feel comfortable standing in that place in the landscape. We feel disorientated, lost and frightened. It's understandable.

But on Friday I was down at the Forget me not club for CITV, and as usual, as well as having one or two rather nice cakes - and a trifle - it's a good thing we don't play cake bingo - I wandered around having a chat. There are a good number of more mature people there - some of them are here - and I always enjoy the stories people tell me. I am often amazed at the way different people are dealing with the challenges of getting older, living their lives with gusto and determination.

The later years of life can be pretty challenging both for those living on their own, and for those who are married. Earlier in the week I went to see a lady who can't get to church anymore. She was also doing her best to live positively - getting fully involved

with the life of her family, even when that was mainly by phone. She also talked about the last years she had with her late husband. One of the great challenges of getting older as a couple is that suddenly, when things have been pretty settled for a long time, new and very testing challenges start coming along one after another - and that can put a big strain on the relationship. But Audrey said that in those years of needing greater compassion and care, she and her husband had also found a new depth in their relationship, which was wonderful.

So what about our relationship with God? As we live with the challenges of getting older, does our relationship with God change too? Some people say that the second half of life is a great opportunity to grow in our inner selves. We no longer need to focus so relentlessly on our work or career, or looking after our family, or maintaining friendships.

And if we seek to learn from the past, we have more raw material to work with. If we make time to reflect back over our life, we begin to see ourselves more truly. That's not always comfortable. We may see the particular cast of our personality, and the way that has impacted on ourselves and those around us, not always for good. I often say to myself 'If only I had understood myself better earlier - when the children were young'. But we need that experience of living to reveal to us what we are really like - so the later years can be a time to face ourselves and learn.

And if we allow God to help us with this challenging work, that may help us to understand more of God's love for us - which

doesn't depend on our achievements, or on us being good parents or good friends or even good people. We begin to understand the meaning of his grace, which works through our weaknesses and our flaws more than through our strengths and successes.

And maybe we can learn not to be quite so independent as well. People often say with pride that they are very independent, but what God wants for us is to be interdependent - being vulnerable about our needs and depending on each other - so we can learn together how to love and care for each other.

Grandparents these days often have to do a lot of caring. I met a grandparent on Friday who gets up at half past 5 so her son can go to work and she can take her grandson to school. If all the childcare provided by grandparents was taken away, society would collapse! So it's good that other times it's the older folks turning to younger ones for support.

What's lovely is when the generations give each other not just practical support, but love, expressed in their particular way. Audrey told me about her teenage granddaughter, who rang up the other day. What do you want, she asked. Nothing, Nan - I just rang up for a natter.

The granddaughter was giving her gift of life and energy - the grandmother her gift of time and listening and wisdom.

Our reading today had that sort of meeting - a meeting between age and youth, between experience and innocence. Simeon and

Anna were both blessed with the gift of age. And they both seemed to be comfortable in the landscape of their lives.

Simeon had learned to live closely with God over many years, not becoming closed off with age, but becoming more and more open to the Holy Spirit. And he was still looking forward. He knew that God had more to give him. He longed for the 'consolation of Israel'. He longed for God to bring healing and hope to a broken and lost people. He believed that he would see a sign of this in his lifetime.

When he saw Jesus and Mary, with Jesus in her arms, Simeon he knew the time was here. He delighted in all that this would mean... For himself, being able to look ahead to the ending of his journey here in peace and trust. For his people - knowing God's glory in a new way - and for the wider world, a new light dawning. His age hadn't made him cynical - but he was able to look at things realistically. He had learnt that when God reaches into our lives it doesn't always bring an end to pain - and he knew Mary would discover that. But he also knew that even in the midst of pain there could be a wider and deeper hope.

We heard too about Anna - 84 - in those days a great age! She was learning in her later years to live a more simple life, praying and fasting, being close to her God. Maybe that's why she too was open to this new thing that God was doing. Like Simeon - and like a lot of older people I meet - Anna's age had freed her from inhibitions - she told everyone she met about this child Jesus.

Simeon and Anna affirm a truth that's easy to miss in this fast moving world. Those who have lived long, in company with God, can have great gifts to give to us - gifts of wisdom and understanding, gifts of attention, and listening, gifts of watching and waiting patiently, gifts of faith and prayer.

May those of us who are younger value those gifts, and receive them. May those of us who are older learn to nurture those gifts, with God's help - and share them generously. And may each of us learn to stand easily in this place in the landscape of our lives, knowing that we are held by God's love, able to look back in his company with gentleness and acceptance, and able to look ahead with trust and hope.