Caring for the Elderly Reading Joshua 14 v 6-14

A few weeks ago, at the start of the church prayer meeting, Helen played a recording which dated from the beginning of the first Covid lockdown. It was a song based on the words “May the Lord bless and keep you” and it featured singers from a wide variety of churches. As we watched we saw the screen fill with happy singers from churches all across the country. It was wonderfully diverse – we saw faces of every shade of complexion and heard traces of different accents. It was all very uplifting and encouraging and it was only towards the end that I realised I’d only seen perhaps a couple of faces looking as though they were over fifty. Perhaps it wasn’t so diverse after all. Of course, it was obvious where the elderly were at that time – carefully isolating in what had been suggested was a 12 week lockdown – and not as yet familiar with the Zoom phenomenon.

Is this what the church would look like without the elderly? Would we be missed? Of course, some churches would not even exist without the elderly who make up a major part of the congregation and I can already see some of you thinking “Who would do this job and that job if not the older ones?” What is elderly anyway? When do we slip over the edge from caring for the elderly to being one of the elderly? And always remember that “really old” means someone at least 5 years older than ourselves!

How is old age regarded in the Bible? What does it say about how the elderly are to be treated and how they are to behave?

Firstly, it is regarded as a blessing. The 5th commandment says “Honour your father and your mother that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you”. One of the blessings to Abraham is that he would live “to a good old age” (Genesis 15 v15). The prophet Zechariah in 8 v4 looks forward to good times coming to Jerusalem when the streets will be filled with boys and girls playing and men and women of ripe old age sitting there with their walking sticks in their hands.

We think of aged patriarchs and matriarchs sitting in comfort surrounded by an ever-increasing family and this illustrates one of the most important aspects of a happy old age – a sense of belonging. It may well be belonging to a blood family or, perhaps increasing in these days, to a group of like-minded people. After all, we are fond of talking about the “church family”. We were made very aware during the lockdown restrictions of the importance of contact with other people, especially our families, and of the effects of loneliness on both mental and physical health. We also realised that loneliness is not restricted to the elderly – all across society people were feeling the effects. As a whole, we have become conscious of our need to belong and to make people feel welcome.

But whether we are elderly or not, a sense of belonging is not just something that other people provide for us. Belonging involves responsibilities, giving as well as receiving and doing both graciously. Not just expecting to be treated with consideration and respect because we’ve managed to survive so far – after all, the Bible says in Leviticus 19 v 32 “Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly” - but trying and praying to deserve that respect.

A number of years ago, when I was barely approaching middle-age I came across a quotation which I intended to put up on the wall when I reached the advanced age of 60 or thereabouts. You may well have come across it too – it’s called the 17th century nun’s prayer and it is equally valid in the 21st century. It starts off “Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself that I am growing older and will someday be old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking that I must say something on every subject and on every occasion. Release me from craving to straighten out everybody’s affairs. Make me thoughtful but not moody: helpful but not bossy. With my vast store of wisdom it seems a pity not to use it all but Thou knowest Lord that I want a few friends at the end”.

Yes, the famous wisdom of the aged, acquired through years of experience. Shouldn’t our families and our church family be taking full advantage of all that? Paul thought so. In his letter to Titus when the latter was a leader in the church at Crete. Paul tells him to teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance. The older women are to be reverent in the way they live, not slanderers or addicted to much wine but able to train the younger women how to behave towards their husbands and children and in their own lives. In other words, to actively pass on what they themselves have learnt and experienced.

These older members of the church are expected not just to belong, to be made welcome and appreciated but also to let their lives be good examples of Christian living and to be willing to play an active part in teaching and helping others. They have a role to fulfil, a job to do.

There’s a universal need to feel necessary. Perhaps that’s why so many of our charities, clubs and organisations rely so heavily on the newly-retired who have both the time and the energy to throw themselves into things which they could not take on when they were busy at work. The church is no different and yet it is perhaps better equipped than many of these to still appreciate people’s need to be useful when the things they are able to do are shrinking in number and extent. The church needs those with the time, experience and will to pray, to advise and, very importantly, to listen. There is a role for everyone even though it changes over time.

This brings us to our reading about Caleb. He had been one of the spies sent into the Promised Land by Moses, and one of the two who came back with a “can do” attitude. Forty-five years have gone by since then and finally the Israelites are fully moving into the land. Joshua is allocating various parts of it to the different tribes and comes to Caleb’s tribe of Judah. As one of the two oldest men in Israel at 85 years Caleb might have expected to be given an easy portion where he could retire and relax. But he’s having none of that. He pre-empts whatever Joshua might have been going to say. He wanted the hill country around the town of Hebron which he had seen when he was spying out the land and which he had been promised by Moses. I prefer the AV rendering where he says “Give me this mountain”.

Not only did he want a difficult terrain, he also wanted a town which he knew was inhabited by the Anakites who were the giants who had so scared the other spies. But Caleb was not deterred. He considered himself to still be as strong and vigorous as he had been in the days when he first saw them and he was convinced that, with the Lord’s help, he would be able to drive them out. What is more, as we can see in the next chapter, he went on to do exactly that.

Now we recognise that elderly people are needed in the church for many of the tasks that require doing, and at the same time we know that it is important for anyone who is elderly to feel that they are still needed and essential. Caleb took it to an extreme that few of us would consider possible. As he said himself, he had followed the Lord wholeheartedly all his life and he intended to claim the promise that Moses had made to him those 45 years earlier. He believed that the promise came from the Lord and that He had not changed His mind over the intervening years. What is more, He had kept Caleb capable of doing his part and he fully intended to do it – he held on to the promises and finally saw them come to fruition.

Are there promises that the Lord made to us in the past? Are we still holding on to them or have we lost faith in His power to bring them to pass? Let Caleb be an encouragement to us. As he said himself he was following the Lord whole-heartedly at the time the promise was made to him and he had continued to do so. The Lord had kept him alive when all his contemporaries other than Joshua had died and the promise was equally alive – just waiting for the right time to be fulfilled. And Caleb was ready for that time. As soon as the territories were being given out he was quick to come forward, to claim his mountain and to announce his intention of playing his part in bringing the promise to pass.

Even if whatever is the modern church equivalent of fighting giants in hilltop cities is beyond us there are still other roles for the elderly. Acts 2 v17 talks about the days when God will pour out His Spirit so that “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams”. I think we can safely assume that this is not the sort of dream that comes with “a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest” as Proverbs 6.10 has it. We probably increasingly indulge in that – sometimes inadvertently in the middle of our favourite TV programme.

The sort of dreaming in Acts is more visionary, more inspired by the Lord, making us more aware of how things could and should be if only we followed Him more whole-heartedly. The sort of dream that needs to be shared and acted upon. The sort of dream that encompasses the kind of people the Lord wants us to be and to teach others to be. We are back to the exhortations in Titus here and the roles that the elderly can play in the church.

Eventually there may come a time when the elderly (and this may in time apply to all of us) need to be cared for more than they can care for others – but even here there are reciprocal responsibilities. I can’t put it better than our 17th century nun did as she ended her prayer.

“Keep me reasonably sweet; I do not want to be a saint – some of them are so hard to live with – but a sour old person is one of the crowning works of the devil. Give me the ability to see good things in unexpected places, and talents in unexpected people. And, give me O Lord the grace to tell them so.”