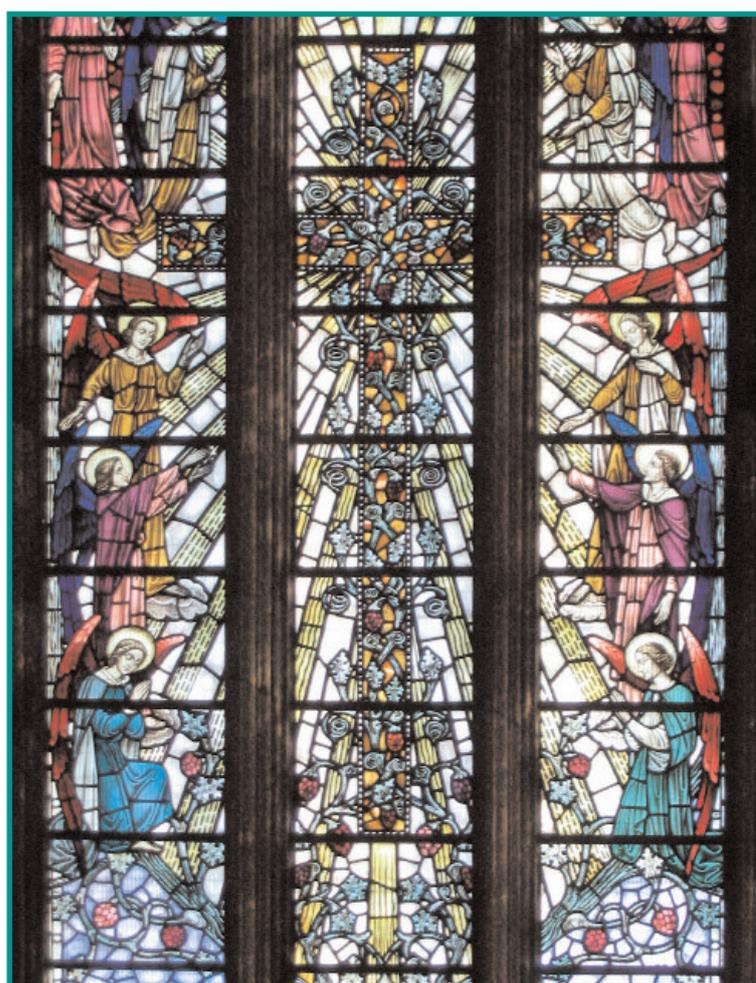


# **CELEBRATING AGE IN WORSHIP**

## **Suggestions and Resources**



LEVESON PAPER NUMBER EIGHTEEN

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The Leveson Centre for the Study of Ageing, Spirituality and Social Policy, Temple House,  
Fen End Road, Temple Balsall, Knowle, Solihull, B93 0AN, Tel: 01564 778022, Fax: 01564  
778432, E-mail: [leveson.centre@virgin.net](mailto:leveson.centre@virgin.net)  
Website: [www.levesoncentre.org.uk](http://www.levesoncentre.org.uk)

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# **Celebrating Age in Worship**

## **Suggestions and Resources**

**Alison M Johnson (Editor)**

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# Introduction

Although many churches now have all-age worship services, these are often in fact aimed at making the service accessible to the younger people present rather than ensuring that everyone can participate and benefit. All too often it is assumed that if concessions have to be made, these must be made by older people. The view seems to be that all other worship is designed for older people so they have no need of special attention. As a result older people may well feel that there is little in such worship to nurture and sustain them and some cease to attend. Trying to please everyone often results in pleasing no one.

Similarly many churches or dioceses have specialist youth workers and celebratory services for children and young people, but never think to appoint an older people's worker or to celebrate age and the contribution of older people. How often do churches or dioceses put on services which are specifically for older people or celebrate their contribution?

This publication is a resource to assist those planning various types of special services for older people.

The first possibility is a service designed for older people as a regular part of the church's pattern of worship. This would not only respond to the needs of those who find all-age worship unhelpful but also for those who find the usual services difficult to attend. They may be too early for them to be ready to go out. They may have problems either with concentration, with sitting still for long periods of time, with getting up and down and following a service book or may be prevented by lack of appropriate toilet facilities. They may find access to the church difficult, the pews uncomfortable or be unable to hear the words or read the service or hymn book. Some

churches have found that a shorter afternoon service in the hall followed by tea and sociability proves popular with older people and attracts those who have formerly not been members of the congregation.

A second possibility is a special service in celebration of age. Such a service would place older people at the heart of the Christian story and in addition acknowledge the anguish and losses which come in the later years of life. We often forget how many causes for celebration there are in older age, as well as causes for sorrow. Perhaps we could have a special service for grandparents and their grandchildren to celebrate the richness of inter-generational relationships. What about a celebration of retirement and the opportunities it brings? Or perhaps a celebration of the gifts and talents of older people or a service for those who have been married for fifty years or more to give thanks for a continuing relationship?

Thirdly there is a fruitful ministry in terms of conducting worship for the so-called forgotten congregations, those living in care homes and no longer able to attend church on a regular basis. The resources section of this publication refers to a number of specialist publications on this topic both from the Leveson Centre and other sources, but the material listed in the remainder of this publication should be useful in planning such services as well.

The focus of this publication is predominantly on the second of these categories – special services celebrating age.

In the words of a report from the Presbyterian Church of the USA, we need to remember in all our planning that 'older adults are not a different category of persons but are simply persons who have travelled further along the journey'.

# Bible readings

There are numerous passages in the Bible which refer to older age and here we have only included a sample. A fuller selection can be found in *A Mission-shaped Church for Older People?* (see resources list).

## **Leviticus 19:32**

Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God

## **1 Samuel 3:1–10**

Call of Samuel

## **Psalms 71:1–9, 17–21**

Do not cast me away when I am old

## **Psalms 90:12–17**

So teach us to number our days

## **Psalms 92**

They shall still bear fruit in old age. They shall be green and succulent

## **Psalms 145:4**

One generation shall commend your works to another

## **Ecclesiastes 3:1–15**

For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven

## **Isaiah 35**

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad ... Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees

## **Isaiah 40:29–31**

They shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint

## **Isaiah 46:3–4**

Even to your old age and grey hair, I am he

## **Joel 2:28–9**

Your old men will dream dreams

## **Luke 2:25–38**

Simeon and Anna

## **John 21:15–19**

When you are old ... someone else will dress you

## **Romans 8:35–39**

Who can separate us from the love of Christ?

## **2 Corinthians 4:16**

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day

## **2 Corinthians 12:9–10**

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness

## **Ecclesiasticus 3:13**

And if his understanding fails him, be understanding of him and do not dishonour him because you have your full strength

## Poetry and prose readings

Most of these poems or prose readings can be found on the internet. Only a few lines are quoted here.

### John Bell

*Advent and Christmas ... are about old people*

This script of a Radio 4 talk reflects on the fact that many of the people in the Christmas story – Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph by tradition, the Wise Men by inference, Simeon and Anna – were old people. God has a place for old people in his plan and expects them to be leaders in recognising what God is doing in his world.

(included in Basil Bridge, *Celebrating the Gift of Years*, available on the internet)

### John Betjeman

*The Last Laugh*

I made hay while the sun shone.  
My work sold.  
Now, if the harvest is over  
And the world cold,  
Give me the bonus of laughter  
As I lose hold.

### Robert Browning

*Rabbi Ben Ezra*

Grow old along with me  
The best is yet to be,  
The last of life, for which the first was made;  
Our times are in his hand  
Who saith, 'A whole I planned,  
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor  
be afraid'.

(included in Basil Bridge, *Celebrating the Gift of Years*, available on the internet)

### D H Lawrence

*Beautiful Old Age*

It ought to be lovely to be old,  
to be full of the peace that comes of experience  
and wrinkled ripe fulfilment ...

... And a girl should say:

It must be wonderful to live and grow old.  
Look at my mother, how rich and still she is!

And a young man should think: By Jove  
my father has faced all weathers,  
but it's been a life!

### Quaker Faith and Practice

*Getting Older*

Sections 43–48 of Chapter 21 contain reflections on growing older.

We must be confident that there is still more life to be lived and yet more heights to scale ... (21:45)

I am convinced it is a great art to know how to grow old gracefully, and I am determined to practise it ... (21:48)

### George Tyrell

As at Tenebrae, one after another lights are extinguished, till one alone – and that the highest of all – is left, so often it is with the soul and her guiding stars. In our early days there are many – parents, teachers, friends, books, authorities – but, as life goes by, one by one they fall and leave us in deepening darkness, with an increasing sense of the mystery and inexplicability of all things, till at last none but the figure of Christ stands out luminous against the prevailing night.

### Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*Morituri Salutamus*

... But why you ask me should the tale be told  
To men grown old or who are growing old?  
It is too late. Ah nothing is too late ...

### W B Yeats

*Sailing to Byzantium*

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless ...

# Hymns

There are of course numerous other hymns which might be chosen either because they are about older age or because they are particularly popular with older people.

**Abide with me,**  
fast falls the eventide

**For the fruits of his creation,**  
thanks be to God

**Hast thou not known, hast thou not heard**  
that firm remains on high ...  
... Mere human power shall fast decay  
and youthful vigour cease;  
but they that wait upon the Lord  
in strength shall still increase

**In his temple now behold him,**  
See the long expected Lord ...  
... While his aged saints adore him  
Ere in faith and hope they die

**Lord for the years**  
your love has kept and guided,  
urged and inspired us,  
cheered us on our way

**Lord it belongs not to my care**  
whether I live or die

**Lord of all hopefulness, Lord of all joy,**  
whose trust, ever childlike, no care could destroy

**Lord of our growing years,**  
with us from infancy ...  
... your grace surrounds us all our days,  
for all your gifts we bring our praise

**Love divine, all loves excelling,**  
joy of heaven to earth come down

**March on, my soul, with strength,**  
march forward void of fear

**My gracious Lord, I own thy right**  
to every service I can pay ...  
... His work my later years shall bless,  
when youthful vigour is no more

**Now thank we all our God,**  
with hearts and hands and voices

**O God of Bethel, by whose hand**  
thy people still are led

**One more step along the world I go ...**  
... keep me travelling along with you

**O God, our help in ages past,**  
our hope for years to come

**Put thou thy trust in God,**  
in duty's path go on,  
walk in his strength with faith and hope,  
so shall thy work be done

**Sing we the song of those who stand**  
around the eternal throne

**The King of Love my shepherd is**  
whose goodness faileth never

**Through all the changing scenes of life,**  
in trouble and in joy

**We praise and bless thee, gracious Lord,**  
our Saviour kind and true,  
for all the old things passed away,  
for all thou hast made new

# Prayers

Most people will want to write or use their own prayers, but there follow a few examples which have been used at special services.

*Prayers from a celebration in Birmingham Cathedral, All Are Called, in October 2005. The concluding 'Pilgrimage Prayer' from Bishop Peter Nott of Norwich includes a quotation from Julian of Norwich: 'from whom we come, in whom we are enfolded, to whom we shall return'.*

Lord God our Father,  
we thank you for the time you have given us,  
and for all your blessings to us  
throughout our lives.

Thank you for all the people  
we remember with gratitude  
for the part they played in our lives.

Thank you for the memories we treasure  
of places, occasions and activities.

Thank you for the part we were able to play.

Thank you for all the signs  
of your unchanging love for us now.

Lord hear us.  
**Lord graciously hear us.**

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God,  
you are the same, yesterday, today and for ever.

You have not changed over the years  
as we have done;  
you have not changed  
as the world around us seems to change.

We thank you for always keeping faith with us.

We thank you for your understanding  
and encouragement,  
your patience and your compassion.

Lord hear us.  
**Lord graciously hear us.**

Help us to come to you now and always, Lord,  
with complete confidence;  
to trust you for ourselves,  
our friends and families,  
for the churches we know,  
and for your world,  
knowing that your good purpose  
lies behind everything.

Lord hear us.  
**Lord graciously hear us.**

You made us for yourself.

We ask that this may be  
what matters most to us.

Help us to keep on growing in wisdom, faith,  
and an ever-deepening awareness  
of your unfailing grace.

Lord hear us.  
**Lord graciously hear us.**

O Lord God, from whom we come,  
in whom we are enfolded,  
to whom we shall return,  
bless us in our pilgrimage through life:  
with the power of the Father protecting,  
with the love of Jesus indwelling,  
and the light of the Spirit guiding,  
until we come to our ending,  
in life and love eternal.

*A prayer for dementia from Remember ...  
re-member, Methodist Homes Sunday 2006  
Worship Resources, Methodist Homes.*

God of all life, we open our lives to you  
so that the urgency of our prayers  
and the love of our hearts  
may find welcome and shelter  
within your endless mercy.

We pray today  
for those who live with dementia:  
for those who have recently come to realise  
that their grip on life is not as firm as once it was.

Lord in your mercy  
**Hear our prayer**

For those who can only maintain their dignity  
by concealing the truth of their illness,  
and for those who love them  
who can see no other option  
but to collude with them.

Lord in your mercy  
**Hear our prayer**

For those who have all but lost contact  
with the world around them,  
who live in a world of their own confusion.

Lord in your mercy  
**Hear our prayer**

We remember all those who care  
for women and men suffering from dementia –  
for partners caring for them at home,  
for those who visit them there,  
and for those working in places  
where they are cared for.

Lord in your mercy  
**Hear our prayer**

*Prayers from an Act of Thanksgiving for older  
people used in St Martin's Church, Osmaston,  
Derbyshire.*

At Christian baptism a candle is presented with  
the words, 'Shine as a light in the world to the  
glory of God the Father.' The candle represents  
God's grace given that life may be lived to  
serve the world's healing rather than the  
world's hurt. As we give thanks for the good  
that many older people contribute to family  
and society, representative individuals will light  
a candle. There will then be a bidding and  
response:

Leader Holy God  
All **We give you thanks and praise.**

#### **A parish councillor**

We give thanks for the contribution to good  
governance made by mature and older people,

especially those who work unpaid to ensure  
the good order of local amenities and services.

#### **A representative of the Royal British Legion**

We give thanks for all who in their youth  
served this country in the armed services, and  
who now, by promoting the annual Poppy  
appeal, work for the well-being of their service  
comrades of this generation.

#### **A school governor**

We give thanks for our local schools and the  
people of all ages that work together to  
promote excellence and to maintain the  
Christian ethos. In today's changing world, we  
give special thanks for the wisdom, experience,  
and support that older people contribute for  
the benefit of schools and their pupils.

#### **A churchwarden**

We give thanks for our church and the  
commitment of many older people to ensuring  
that it remains an attractive and welcoming  
place where people of all ages may find God  
and refreshment amongst his people.

#### **A representative of the Women's Institute (or similar organisation)**

We give thanks for the Women's Institute and the  
contribution of older people in this and other  
similar organizations that encourage friendship,  
broad learning, and generous service.

#### **A carer**

We give thanks that older people are not  
simply recipients of care but are often very  
effective carers to those less physically able  
than themselves, both within families and  
within the wider community.

#### **A grandparent**

We give thanks for the supportive role many  
grandparents play in family life, and for the  
example they give to the next generation of  
children and young people.

Almighty and everlasting God,  
by whose Spirit the whole body of the Church  
is governed and sanctified:  
hear our prayer which we offer for all your  
faithful people;  
that each in their vocation and ministry  
may serve you in holiness and truth:  
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen

*Prayer of Teilhard de Chardin from Le Milieu  
Divin*

When the signs of age begin to mark my body,  
(and still more when they touch my mind); when  
the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off  
strikes from without or is born within me; when  
the painful moment comes in which I suddenly  
awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old;  
and above all at that last moment when I feel I  
am losing hold of myself and am absolutely  
passive within the great unknown forces that  
have formed me; in all these dark moments, O  
God, grant that I may understand (provided only  
my faith is strong enough) that it is you who are  
painfully parting the fibres of my being in order  
to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance  
and bear me away within yourself.

Amen

*A 17th century nun's prayer*

Lord, Thou knowest better than I know myself  
that I am growing older and will some day be  
old. Keep me from the fatal habit of thinking  
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.

Keep my mind free from the recital of endless  
details; give me wings to get to the point. Seal  
my lips on my aches and pains. They are  
increasing, and love of rehearsing them is  
becoming sweeter as the years go by. I dare not  
ask for grace enough to enjoy the tales of

others' pains, but help me to endure them  
with patience.

I dare not ask for improved memory, but for a  
growing humility and a lessening cocksureness  
when my memory seems to clash with the  
memories of others. Teach me the glorious  
lesson that occasionally I may be mistaken.

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.

Amen

*An anonymous prayer*

O Lord God,  
you have called your servants to ventures  
of which we cannot see the ending,  
by paths as yet untrodden,  
through perils unknown:  
give us faith to go out with a good courage,  
not knowing whither we go,  
but only that your hand is leading us,  
and your love supporting us,  
to the glory of your name.

Amen.

*From the 1928 revision of the Book of Common  
Prayer*

O Lord,  
support us all the day long of this troublous life,  
until the shades lengthen,  
and the evening comes,  
and the busy world is hushed,  
the fever of life is over,  
and our work done.  
Then, Lord, in thy mercy,  
grant us safe lodging,  
a holy rest,  
and peace at the last:  
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

## Addresses about ageing

It is not suggested that these should be used verbatim but rather as a source of ideas and inspiration.

*A sermon preached at Temple Balsall Heritage Weekend on Sunday 12 September 2004 by The Rt Revd Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford*

An aged man is but a paltry thing ... Unless ...

For some of us, including myself, the subject of ageing has ceased to be of purely theoretical interest. To use the jargon, it has become of existential concern. It is me who is slowing up, stiffening up, needing bits repaired here and put right there. And I find myself in a bit of a dilemma. I have a wonderful vision of ageing to share with you: but I'm not sure my body, that is, me, is ready to go along with it.

The vision is contained in the verse from which the title of my sermon is taken, a verse by W B Yeats.

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress

'An aged man is a paltry thing, a tattered coat upon a stick.' It's a vivid picture. An old man is no better than a scarecrow. A stick in the ground with some rags thrown over it. 'Unless soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress.' An aged man is nothing unless, says Yeats, we are able to rejoice as we get old and rejoice even more with every step of ageing.

It's an amazing vision and one which stands in sharp contrast to our familiar western model. The assumption in our culture is that life is a process of physical growth, followed by physical decline – the seven ages of man in Shakespeare ending in shrunken shank and slipped pantaloons. The alternative to this is a vision of life as a process of growth in the whole person, emotional and spiritual as well as physical,

followed by further growth of a personal and spiritual kind, as we decline physically. Further, as Yeats challenges us to consider, that personal and spiritual growth, being directly related to the decline in our physical powers, 'Soul louder sing for every tatter in its mortal dress.'

This is a vision shared by the Roman Catholic priest Teilhard de Chardin. He believed that first we have to utilise all the forces of growth in life but then, no less, we have to use the forces of what he called diminishment. Here is a prayer he wrote:

Now that I have found the joy of utilising all forms of growth to make you, or to let you, grow in me, grant that I may willingly consent to this last phase of communion in the course of which I shall possess you by diminishing in you.

When the signs of age begin to mark my body, (and still more when they touch my mind); when the ill that is to diminish me or carry me off strikes from without or is born within me; when the painful moment comes in which I suddenly awaken to the fact that I am ill or growing old ... in all these dark moments, O God, grant that I may understand (provided only my faith is strong enough) that it is you who are painfully parting the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself.

This, as I say, is a wonderful vision: but every fibre of our being reacts against it. If we get a headache we seek pain relief. If something is wrong with us we go to a doctor in order to be made better. If we fall sick we struggle to get well again. We want to be healthy and hate things that get us down, even common coughs and colds.

I remember talking a few years ago to an aged Methodist minister. He was honest enough to say that, though as a Christian he had prepared for death, now in his late 80s when he ought to

feel ready for it, he desperately didn't want to go. He still relished life. It's a view very well captured in the famous verse by Dylan Thomas on the death of his father, 'Do not go gentle into that good night ... rage, rage against the dying of the light.' Nor is this an unbiblical view. On the contrary, death in the Bible is more often than not seen as an enemy.

So perhaps we should try to prolong life as long as possible? With modern medical techniques we might be able to extend life indefinitely. With stem cell therapy the different organs and cells in our body will be able to be renewed. Genetic modification of the embryo might reverse the present genetic programme for ageing and dying. There has been a conference in London this week on anti-ageing which predicts that there will be a lifespan of 130 years in the next half century or so, with the possibility of extending life indefinitely. Should we therefore welcome and encourage this development? To some extent it is inevitable. People will go on having longer lives simply because of the improvement in all kinds of medical techniques. But do we want actively and aggressively to pursue the possibility of prolonging life indefinitely, perhaps becoming immortal on this earth?

Here I come back to the fact that nature has actually programmed us for ageing and death. That is a fundamental feature of our genetic make-up. I certainly don't think we should simply accept nature as it is, just because it is there. It is our human vocation to interact creatively with the natural order and manipulate nature for human wellbeing. Scientific medicine is based on that premise. But that said, it is important to recognise the wisdom which is inherent in nature, the nature that through millions of years of evolution has brought us here to be the people that we are now. The fact that God has made us as part of a natural order in which there is a decline as well as growth, death as well as life is perhaps to be interpreted as part of divine providence, as part of God's good plan for us. Austin Farrer wrote:

Man's destiny consists of two parts: first we live and then we die. In the eyes of God our dying is not simply negative, it is an immensely

important and salutary thing; by living we become ourselves, by dying we become Gods if, that is, we know how to die; if we so die that everything we have become in our living is handed back to God who gave us life, for him to refashion and use according to his pleasure.

God desires that we should grow, live, expand, enrich our minds and our imaginations, become splendid creatures. He also desires that we should die, should be crucified on the cross of Christ Jesus, should surrender all we have and are to him; and he desires that we should die that death spiritually before we die it physically.

I began by saying I have a wonderful vision of ageing to share with you but that my whole being rebels against it. For I want health, full and lasting health, not diminution, decline and eventually death. I want my capacities, physical and mental. I don't like the thought of them wearing out. I think that rebellion has a point, for God wants us to have all the health and strength that there is going.

That is very much the view of the Hebrew scriptures, the Christian Old Testament. We should resist any premature resignation to things as they are. Struggle against the forces of diminishment is part of what it means to be a human being. That said it is simply a fact of life that old age does slow us up. Some of the things we once did we can do no longer and this does provide an opportunity to develop in new ways.

Let me give a rather basic personal example. I loved tennis. I found it difficult to imagine a life without it. But hip trouble stopped that and I haven't played for a number of years now. Needing exercise I got my son to teach me to swim properly. I have always enjoyed swimming but found it a rather exhausting business. He taught me to swim with a proper style, so that I could swim decent distances with some pleasure.

So it is we can develop in new ways, not primarily perhaps in physical ways but in terms of our essential person. As our outer life slows down our inner life can become more important and enriched. As we cease to be able to do some things, we can learn to do others;

develop different kinds of relationship with one another and with God, perhaps relationships of greater sensitivity or depth. In all the circumstances of our life, not least in the process of ageing, God is with us, helping us through his grace to develop in new ways, perhaps ways that we never thought of before.

This theme is wonderfully summed up in 2 Corinthians 4:16, where St Paul writes:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Ronald Blythe is a novelist, poet and historian. He has lived in East Anglia all his life and now lives in Wormingford, Suffolk from where he writes his regular weekly column for The Church Times. He is a Lay Canon of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich Cathedral and a Doctor of Letters. Two volumes of his sermons have recently been published by Canterbury Press, The Circling Year and Talking to One's Neighbours. He preached this sermon on 12 October 2005.*

Anna, Simeon and Ourselves  
Luke 2:22-40  
Ecclesiastes 1-14

I was still a boy when I realised that the only people who could tell me what it was like to be old were the old. Like so many writers-to-be I was enthralled to hear aged relations and neighbours talk about events which were to me 'history'. The Great War, the farming which was identical to that which I read about in the Thomas Hardy novels, the London of Charles Dickens. I noticed that the voices of these old people were different, their accents, their slang. I found their appearance intriguing, for in those post-World War One days, old people still tended to dress the part, as did my grandmother, born in Suffolk in 1860. And I was a young man when I realised that the huge new profession of age-care and age-medicine which was coming about because, as they said 'we are all living so long these days', had to be based on something which those who worked in it could

only have a part knowledge of – simply because they were not old.

When I was a young man of about 50, a great conference took place in Chicago about the new phenomenon of longevity in the modern world; and the strange words 'gerontology' and 'geriatric' entered the popular language. I crossed them off my list and continued to say old age, just as I continue to say 'dying' – and not terminal illness. Of course, the word gerontology has a simple and even beautiful origin. It comes from Geron, who was a Greek old man. Not far from this cathedral, John Henry Newman, then in his 60s, a good age at that time – it was in the 1860s – started to think about the end of life. He thought he was old – and never imagined that he would live to be 90. So he wrote a marvellous poem, *The Dream of Gerontius* – an old man's dream of his own death. Elgar would set it to music. It contains the grand hymn 'Praise to the Holiest in the Height' which angels sing as Gerontius' soul goes to a loving God.

After I had written *Akenfield*, I discovered that I had quite a lot about the old district nurse which I had to leave out as it really belonged to another book altogether. She was now in her 90s and peacefully and thoughtfully 'going to God' in what had been newly labelled the geriatric ward of our local hospital. I sat with her and as I did so, the book which would hold the items left over from *Akenfield* began to suggest to me a new book which, while not refuting the social and medical realities of being old, would view it philosophically as a great human experience, one which previous generations had for the most part been denied.

You see, in our own life time our allowance of years has shot up from an average 40-something to an average 73. Nothing like it has been known before. Although it was accepted all through what we might call the biblical centuries that the body had been divinely programmed to last for three score years and ten, unless we were blessed with a further decade, we have historic proof that the majority of people never came anywhere near reaching old age. Even in our collective memory we look

back on a mass of men and women who were toil-worn and disease-ridden by middle age and in a way in which one never sees today. If someone from Nelson's England could walk through our seaside resorts on a summer's day, he would be as much amazed by the sight of thousands of septuagenarians and preponderantly octogenarians in their white and palely coloured clothes watching the waves as he would be by a television set.

It used to be the exception to go grey, to reach the menopause, to retire, to become senile, to acquire that subtle blend of voice and skin and behaviour which feature so largely in our long-living 21st century, and which, so anxiously, we refer to in all sorts of ways as, well, senior citizens, the third age, etc. But at heart we recognise in ourselves just simple old age and find that there is a comfort in this acknowledgment, and that it can be, in spite of all that is said and written about it by the young, by experts, by the now huge caring professions, a wonderful part of our lives.

This address addresses the common pleasures and achievements of our later years. It seeks to balance the journalistic – and even the medical – view of them as a period of decay and distress, of 'concern' and 'difficulty'. Certainly these things, and the help needed to deal with them, will occur to some of us, yet they are likely to remain only a fraction of the extraordinary experience of what we call old age.

In an attempt to discover how religion affected modern old age I went to stay at a monastery in order to observe and listen to some elderly monks. There were monks of all ages from 28 to 95, so the monastery wasn't at all like an old people's home – something I will come to. It ran like a holy clock: chapel, meals at a big table listening to someone reading, a novel maybe, an autobiography. There was gardening, times when you talked and didn't talk, companionship and, should you feel like it, a walk round the town. Nobody was forced to leave, however old they were, except for hospital treatment. Young men walked with old men, and each listened to the other. Nobody sat round the walls watching television all day. But one of

these Fathers, as they called themselves, told me, 'I am very lucky to be in this community now that I am growing old – luckier than my poor sister's husband, now that he is left. I think widowers are more to be pitied than widows these days. They are lost. He will feel – lost. Whatever happens you cannot be lost in a community. You don't ever retire. I am not much good at the singing now, but every voice contributes something. In a community the oldest person is useful. There is no one here who is not *useful*. We stay useful and see that we are kept useful. There is no one here who is not useful.'

Writers and artists may not stay useful or even wanted, but they do not 'retire', so that their work experience is unlike most people's work experience, when one toils towards some particular date – 60, 65, 70. Not having this date set like a time signpost before one all one's life tends to not so much keep one going, as to retain one's identity. A great many pensioners retire to our lovely East Anglian villages and grow old there, and, on the whole, none of us really know what they were in the world of work, as it is called. All that we know is that we would be in dire straits if these retired men and women had not entered our community to be (unpaid) school governors, church officials, councillors and every kind of assistant imaginable.

Britain is half-run by these volunteers with their hidden qualifications for doing practically everything. It has become normal to be retired for at least a quarter of a century. But one of the disasters of modern old age is either to be given nothing to do, or to be too infirm – or too undirected – to be useful, and to have to fill the days with the kind of activities which the middle-aged think that the old want. It is a blessing to take walks, read books, have friends to meals, have a cat or two, a dog, to get tired occasionally, to have a nice drink if you feel like it, and to rediscover God.

It is traditional for old people to groan about the young, and the not so young, their manners, their selfishness etc. But we too can be ill-mannered and certainly very boring at times,

even occasionally unendurable. We told our children, 'Mind your manners!' and we should now and then tell ourselves, 'Mind your manners!' Being 80 does not necessarily give us the right to be rude and unkind. Yet I have always loved the outspokenness which is often a part of old age, although we must remember that, should it be the case, the drugs which keep us going can also release our inhibitions. What the old long to feel is simply to be loved – not liked, not just cared for. And this is not something we can obtain by any method other than being *lovable*.

Mostly we exist best on friendship. To be of a great age and to be surrounded by real friends – not kindly acquaintances – is the highest achievement which age can bring us. Maybe you will remember that poignant line from a Tennessee Williams play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when Blanche's final words were, 'I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.' More and more old people in our society have to depend on the kindness of strangers and it is both up to them and to the worrying increase of the old people's home that this should not be. The normality of great old age in this country has to be viewed both politically and personally, as both a social and spiritual progression for which we should thank God and hygiene. Our big question is how we should live these years. Indeed, how can we afford to live them, now that the old age pension provision is breaking down under the weight of numbers?

However, as the readings I have chosen for this service show, the last years of a long life are best understood when we apply some philosophy to them, and not treat them as an entirely medical or financial matter, important though these things are. Our faith has many true things to say about time and ourselves – for in the long run our lives are a matter of earthly time and of God's timeless interest in us. So we have in these readings two old folk staying alive as best they could so as to catch a glimpse of a baby, and an old man who had 'everything', as we would say, and yet as his long life slowly drew to its end, had nothing. We don't actually know his name, but he seems to have been a prince who loved women, music and poetry and who had

enormous wealth, but who came to the conclusion that everything the world had given him was vain and ultimately pointless. This old prince is a mighty poet, but he advises his son not to write books, and he writes off all his possessions, his letters, his learning, and concludes that the whole duty of man is to keep God's commandments. It is perhaps the most magnificent piece of disillusionment with life in Western literature. Whereas the simple story of old Anna, in her 80s, and ancient Simeon, watching the month-old boys being carried into the Temple by their parents to be registered – really for later military service – to see which would be the Messiah, is filled with hope. Many Christians, coming to the end of their lives, whisper Simeon's farewell to this world, 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.' This boy would, when he grew up, restore dead young people to life, but not dead old people. If disease had unfairly denied a full life to a young person, Christ would restore it to him or her. But we have no record of his granting further years to those who were, as they said, 'full of years'. It was logical.

We who are old now are partly sustained by the wisdom of the past and by the gerontology of the present, and by love. Many of us are really loved still and many of us are cut off from the love we once knew. Most of us do not expect or even want to be what we once were. We are surprised by the benefits and the visions of old age. Some old people are so entirely absorbed in a particular interest which unites for them the mind and the feelings that time no longer threatens them as it did when they were young. When the naturalist Gilbert White made the last entry in his Journal in June 1793, 'The ground is as hard as iron,' there isn't the faintest forewarning of what was to happen a few days later, when they would lower him into it. In his diary he was just continuing what he had begun 25 years earlier, 'It freezes under people's beds.' Gilbert White is one of those people who pay scant attention to ageing. He has integrated himself into two calendars, one of nature the other of his village church. And, so, instead of looking back or looking forward, he became a man who lived in the present, thus obeying Christ's command. White is full of life. The sap

risers, the cucumbers are doing well, a blue hawk flashes across the stubble, the nightingale sings of an evening. He was in his 70s, a vast age then, when he wrote, 'My weeding-woman swept up on the grass, picked a bushel of blossoms from the white apple-trees.' I quote him as an example of someone who was too busy to think about age, a man who spent most of his life outside, walking, digging, and most of all *looking* and *listening*.

Old people like to revisit the past. They want to satisfy themselves that it is still there. I remember an old Suffolk man who climbed the belfry stairs to look at the name he had carved on the stone when he was 18. It is the nature of old people to become their own confessors, their own poets and story-tellers. Who else can tell what they had seen, had heard, had been? Old age, great old age, that is, is filled with death and yet full of life. It is a tremendous achievement and it is, for some, a disaster. Nowadays it is long enough, and yet far from long enough. The poet Ruth Fainlight wrote:

Assume nothing at all.  
Even to hope you might live for ever  
Brings the end too close.

I once had an old friend, a clergyman's widow in her nineties, who was witty and energetic. And this is what she said to me. It is almost my favourite old age confession, and I will end with it, for it contains a lesson for us all. 'When I finally manage to go, my daily woman will say, "Oh, what a nuisance she was, poor thing!" Except she won't, because she is so good. Come to think of it, I could afford to be a bit of a nuisance with her. She wouldn't even notice it, I daresay. She has become my closest and most trusted friend. She lets me rely on her, and anyone who will let you do that is worth their weight in gold. And the woman who does my shopping would come to me at once if I needed her. I see them both as part of the goodness of God, you know. All the same, I don't see why they should be put to a lot of mess and muddle when the time comes, and so I shall be pleased to just go off quickly, in my sleep, or something like that – although I feel as right as rain!'

I don't actually feel so old, now I come to think of it. I have sons and grandchildren and great-grandchildren and they all troop in to see me, and none of them treats me like an old woman, and that helps. I forget their names – naturally. They're very casual. The young are so casual. But charming and pretty. They are very careless though. They are so kind to me and they show their love for me. You get things back, don't you? Friendship is one's own responsibility. Old age shouldn't make one less friendly or less interested in getting new friends. All my *old* friends are in the graveyard, and if I hadn't made any new ones, where would I be? I think a lot of old people just aren't very sensible. My advice for the aged woman is find some young people. Don't go to these dreadful old people's clubs – find some young people! Put up with their casualness because it's worth it! Why, I should like to know, are they so casual, I wonder ... ?

When I was 74 I went to London for a hip operation. When you are 92 and you say, 'When I was 74', it is almost like saying 'When I was young'. The surgeon said, 'Your heart is a girl's of eighteen.' He was quite a flirt.

Being old is very chilly, I assure you. Cooking keeps you warm inside and out. My heavenly Father has looked after me from the cradle, and he won't stop at the grave. Through all my life he has taken care of me.

All faiths have a special place for old age. They honour it and recognise it as a time of vision and prayer. I am astonished when I hear talk of 'elderly congregations'. There *should* be elderly congregations – young ones too, of course. Churches and mosques must still have their Annas and Simeons, men and women who are able to recognise God and say 'Thank you'. Simeon actually takes God in his arms – '*Now* let your servant depart in peace.' Being able to hold this child to him completes his life. Old age is our completion and it must be seen as such. It has its own joys, its own triumphs, its own blessings, its own happiness.

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*A sermon preached at Temple Balsall Heritage Weekend on Sunday 11 September 2005 by The Rt Revd John Sentamu, then the Bishop of Birmingham*

Old Age  
1 Samuel 1:1–20  
Luke 2:21–38

Old age. How should we approach him or her?

A Japanese saying answers:

If only, when one heard  
That Old Age was coming  
One could bolt the door  
Answer 'Not at home'  
And refuse to meet him.

(Kokinshu, *Anthology of Japanese Literature*)

Do we share Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's hopeful optimism that 'Old age comes from God, old age leads on to God, old age will not touch me only so far as he wills?'

Was H L Mencken right when he said that 'The older I grow the more I distrust the familiar doctrine that age brings wisdom?' And what about Malcolm Muggeridge who said that 'One of the many pleasures of old age is giving things up'? But someone is bound to respond by saying that it depends on what one is made to give up as a result of old age. An anonymous older person wrote the following:

My deafness I endure  
To dentures I'm resigned  
Bifocals I can manage  
But God, how I miss my mind.

Is it true that 'Religion often gets credit for curing radicals when old age is the real medicine?' (Austin O'Malley, *Keystones of Thought*).

Do we share D H Lawrence's youthful hope?

It ought to be lovely to be old,  
to be full of the peace that comes of experience  
and wrinkled ripe fulfilment (*Selected Poems*)

Our reading from Luke's gospel, chapter two, shows us two older people who responded to old age in an amazing way. Both lived in their homeland occupied by an imperial power and yet had no dreams of violence and of power and of armies with banners, but believed in a life of constant prayer and quiet watchfulness for God's day of salvation. All their lives they waited quietly and patiently upon God. Simeon and Anna were like that: in prayer, in worship, in humble and faithful expectation they were waiting for the day when God would comfort his people. And they wouldn't have agreed with Graham Greene who said that, 'With the approaching of death I care less and less about religion and truth. One hasn't too long to wait for revelation and darkness' (*A Sort of Life*).

As our reading told us, God had promised to Simeon through the Holy Spirit that his life wouldn't end before he had seen God's own anointed king. In the baby Jesus he recognised that king and was glad. Now he was ready to depart in peace and his words have become the Nunc Dimittis, one of the great and precious hymns of the Church.

He says that Jesus will be the cause whereby many will fall and many will rise. Jesus will meet much opposition. We may refuse or accept Jesus. Long ago Seneca said that what people needed above all was a hand let down to lift them up. It's the hand of Jesus which lifts us up out of the old life into the new goodness, out of shame into glory. And it's the tragedy of life that our pride often keeps us from making that acceptance which leads to victory. Simeon says to us: Approach old age by putting your ageing hand into the hand of Jesus. For faith isn't a prop to lean on but the very act of leaning. And towards Jesus Christ there can be no neutrality. We either accept him or are at war with him. Simeon, with God at the centre of his life, grew old gracefully. His dream was realised.

In Anna we catch a glimpse of a lovely old age. And in my book Anna is a symbol of hope for all who have suffered loss. Married for only seven years and then widowed until the age of 84. She didn't treat this as an obstacle but as an opportunity to draw closer to God, following

God radically through worship, fasting and prayer.

Anna had known sorrow and she hadn't grown bitter. Sorrow can do one of two things to us: it can make us hard, bitter, resentful, rebellious against God or it can make us kinder, softer, and more sympathetic. It can rob us of our trust in God or it can root our trust even deeper. It all depends on how we understand who God is. If we think of God as a judgemental tyrant we will resent him. If we think of him as a gracious Father we will use our sorrows to engage with him positively.

Anna was old and she had never ceased to hope. Age can take away the bloom and the strength of our bodies. It can do worse. The years can take away the life of our hearts until the hopes that we once cherished die and we grimly resign to things as they are.

I am grateful to God that both my parents – mother died of throat cancer at the age of 70 (she was in a great deal of pain and had become a bag of bones), and my dad died of pneumonia aged 95 – never saw God as distant and detached, but saw God as intimately connected with their lives. They saw God's hand on the helm and were absolutely sure that the best is yet to come. The years, the suffering, the sorrow never diminished their hope or drove them to despair. Both of them were praising God as they died. Their hearts were overflowing with thankfulness.

Like Anna, my parents came to be what they were because they never ceased to worship. We heard how Anna spent her life in God's house with God's people. My parents saw the Church as God's gift to them to nurture them in the faith.

Like Anna, my parents never ceased to pray. When dad came to stay with us in Stepney we asked him one day to say grace before a meal. He began well but for the next five minutes he went on to say a general thanksgiving prayer encompassing the whole 90 years of his life. The children's response was, 'Dad, do you mind not asking granddad to say grace next time?' And you would find my dad throughout the day praising, worshipping and talking and listening to God.

It is great to be able to meet with God's people for worship as well as being able to worship privately. The example of my parents has taught me that people pray best together who first pray alone. The years had left my parents without bitterness and in unshakable hope because day by day they kept their contact with God who is the source and strength, and in whose strength our weakness is made perfect. As the Book of Job asks, 'Is wisdom with the aged, and understanding in the length of days?' (Job 12:12). His answer is: 'With God are wisdom and strength; he has counsel and understanding' (Job 12:13). 'It isn't the old that are wise, nor the aged that understand what is right' (Job 32:90). And perhaps Edmund Burke was right when he said, 'The arrogance of age must submit to be taught by youth.'

It would be a good thing if it could be said of us, as it was said of King David, 'He died in a good old age, full of days, riches and honour' (1 Chronicles 29:28). He wrote many Psalms and his son, Solomon, wrote Proverbs.

Simeon, Anna, Hannah, Kings David and Solomon and my parents, all say that when old age crept up on them they were driven deeper and deeper into God. How should we respond to old age? By keeping close to God; keeping close to humankind; and seeking to bring humankind and God together. Yes – God at the centre of our living; at the centre of our thinking; at the centre of our planning; at the centre of our hoping and rejoicing; and at the centre of our ageing. And humankind as pilgrims with us on the way to old age. That's the best way to respond to old age. That's how I am responding. Why not join me? My parents blazed the trail and I'm following their good example. God and you all please assist me in my feeble efforts. Thank YOU.

## Further resources

### For a celebrating age service

- Albans, Keith (2003) *Old in Years and Young in Soul: a book to help us to pray*, Methodist Homes for the Aged.
- Bridge, Basil (1999) *Celebrating the gift of years: worship material*, United Reformed Church (online at [www.urc.org.uk/church\\_society](http://www.urc.org.uk/church_society))
- Clarke, Raymond (2001) 'Worshipping' in Albert Jewell, *Older People and the Church*, Methodist Publishing House.
- Collyer, Michael et al (eds) (2008) *A Mission-shaped Church for Older people? Practical suggestions for local churches*, The Leveson Centre.
- Pratt Green, Fred (1991) *The Last Lap: a sequence in verse on the theme of old age*, Stainer and Bell.

### For leading worship in care homes

- Butler, Michael et al (1999) *Worship in Residential Care* (Good Practice Guide No 2 revised edition), CCOA.
- Carols that Live* (large print) Available from PO Box 341, Enterprise House, Northampton NN3 2WZ.
- Collyer, Michael (2004) *Parche: taking the church into residential care homes in Eastbourne* (Discovering Faith in Later Life No 1), Church Army.
- Hymns that Live* (large print) Available from PO Box 341, Enterprise House, Northampton NN3 2WZ.
- Johnson, Alison M (2000) *Residential Care: A Christian Perspective*, CCOA.
- Kirkbride, Susan (2005) *O Tidings of Comfort and Joy – favourite Christmas hymns* (CD), Stirling Dementia Services Development Centre. Available by phoning 01786 467740 or e-mailing [dementia@stir.ac.uk](mailto:dementia@stir.ac.uk).
- Kirkbride, Susan (2005) *Restoring the soul: A selection of favourite hymns* (CD), Stirling

Dementia Services Development Centre. Available by phoning 01786 467740 or e-mailing [dementia@stir.ac.uk](mailto:dementia@stir.ac.uk).

- Knocker, Sally and Johnson, Alison M (2005) *Creating Links between Care settings and Local Faith Communities: A practice guide*, NAPA. Available by phoning 020 078 9375 or e-mailing [sue@napa-activities.co.uk](mailto:sue@napa-activities.co.uk).
- SCOP (2007) *Worship with Older People in a Care Setting*, SCOP.
- Woodward, James and Houlden, Leslie (2006) *Services for Weekdays*, SPCK.
- Woodward, James and Houlden, Leslie (2007) *Praying the Lectionary: Prayers and reflections for every week's readings*, SPCK.
- Woodward, James (nd) *Service of Holy Communion*, unpublished (a shortened communion service designed for use in the care home. Available on application from the Leveson Centre)

### For leading worship with people with dementia

- Crosskey, Chris (2004) *Older People, Faith and Dementia: twenty-four practical talks for use in care homes* (Leveson Paper No 7), The Leveson Centre and Church Army.
- Goldsmith, Malcolm (2004) 'Worship – problems and possibilities' in Malcolm Goldsmith, *In a Strange Land: People with dementia and the local church*, 4M Publications.
- Hammond, Gaynor and Treetops, Jackie (2004) *The Wells of Life: moments of worship with people with dementia – suggestions for action*, Faith in Elderly People, Leeds. Available from 29 Silverdale Avenue, Guiseley, Yorkshire, LS20 8BD.
- Higgins, Patricia and Allen, Richard (2007) *Lighting the Way: spiritual and religious care for those with dementia* (Leveson Paper No 16), The Leveson Centre.

## Leveson Centre Publications

***Working with Older People: A Resource Directory for Churches***, details of over 100 church-related organisations working with older people (published in collaboration with MHA Care Group), 2004, £7.50 (in plastic wallet), £15.00 (in A4 binder)

- Paper 1 ***Understanding the Needs of Older People***, Alison M Johnson and Helen Hickman Morris, 2001, £4.00
- Paper 2 ***Valuing Age? An Agenda for Society and the Church***, Mark Santer, first Leveson Lecture, 2001, £4.00
- Paper 3 ***Committed to the Asylum? The Long Term Care of Older People***, Malcolm Johnson, second Leveson Lecture, 2002, £4.00
- Paper 4 ***A Good Death***, papers presented at a Leveson seminar, 2003, £5.00
- Paper 5 ***The Policy Challenges of Population Ageing***, Kenneth Howse, 2003, £7.50
- Paper 6 ***Dementia: Improving Quality of Life***, papers presented at a Leveson seminar, 2003, £5.00
- Paper 7 ***Older People, Faith and Dementia: twenty-four practical talks for use in care homes***, Chris Crosskey (published in partnership with Church Army), 2004, £6.00
- Paper 8 ***Seeing the Person beyond the Dementia***, papers presented at a Leveson seminar, 2004, £5.00
- Paper 9 ***Is Religion the Friend of Ageing?*** Peter G Coleman, third Leveson Lecture, 2004, £5.00
- Paper 10 ***Journeying through Old Age and Illness***, Leo Missinne, 2004, £5.00
- Paper 11 ***The Experience of Ageing: A Challenge to Christian Belief***, Helen Oppenheimer, fourth Leveson Lecture, 2005, £4.00
- Paper 12 ***Palliative Care for People with Dementia***, based on papers presented at a Leveson seminar, 2005, £5.00
- Paper 13 ***Befriending Illness***, James Woodward, 2006, £4.00
- Paper 14 ***A Good Funeral***, papers presented at a Leveson seminar, 2006, £5.00
- Paper 15 ***Thinking the Unthinkable Ten Years On***, The Rt Hon Frank Field MP, fifth Leveson Lecture, 2006, £4.00
- Paper 16 ***Lighting the Way: Spiritual and religious care for those with dementia***, Patricia Higgins and Richard Allen, 2007, £5.00
- Paper 17 ***The Humour of Old Age***, Revd Dr Una Kroll, sixth Leveson Lecture, 2007, £4.00
- Paper 18 ***Celebrating Age in Worship: Suggestions and resources***, Alison M Johnson (ed), 2008, £4.00

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