

The Warburton Lecture  
given in the chapel of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn  
at Morning Prayer on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2026  
Second Sunday after Trinity

Ageing: Blessing or Burden?  
Psalm 92 Genesis 48:13-end & I Timothy 5:1-8

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There are surprisingly few references to old age in scripture. Today's readings represent some of the spaces within which age is referred to. Perhaps Islam and Judaism may have a stronger religious culture of celebrating older age. The Churches in this land have had a tradition of the care of older people. We might be familiar with Almshouse accommodation provided for the elderly who had limited resources. Today we lament of Churches populated with older people and many of our older neighbours are fearful of how they might be able to afford the costs of care in old age. Most of us might hope for full years if they are healthy and we have sufficient resources to live well. So, what is ageing? A Blessing or Burden?<sup>2</sup>

In Psalm 92 we are reminded that it is good to praise the Lord and this is part of our reminding us of the steadfastness of God. In verse 14 there is a powerful and enduring promise for older adults, 'They also shall bring forth more fruit in their age; And shall be fat and well liking'. In the reading from Genesis, we are reminded of the physical frailty of older age as we are told that Jacob's eyes were dim with age. There is confusion but although Jacob's physical limitations bear down upon him his ability to discern God's prophetic will, his spiritual discernment remains a vital part of his life. There is grace and

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<sup>1</sup> For more work in this area of practical theology see my web page [www.jameswoodward.info](http://www.jameswoodward.info)

<sup>2</sup> I want to acknowledge Bishop Mark Santer ( Bishop of Birmingham) and Bill Hesselby ( Chair of Governors of the Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson) who enabled much of my early thinking this area. I was Master of of the Foundation of Lady Katherine Leveson from 1998- 2009.

even at the end as he passes down the patriarchal covenant to the next generation. Finally, the apostle Paul instructs Timothy on how to care for different groups within the church with a strong emphasis on treating people with respect especially older people and widows. The church is instructed here to financially and practically honour widows in need. There is a moral imperative to provide for old members of the household.

This morning I invite us all face some of the dimensions of how we both think and act around age and older people. This need is more urgent now as it ever was. Living longer is a gift with blessings, but it also brings its burdens. Who will speak about the truth of older age and be a voice for those who are growing older?

Here is the core of my thesis. In facing truth about age, we should reconstruct age from a narrative of change and decline (inevitable as they are in later age) to a narrative of ascent, growth, improvement, progress, strengthening and generative growth. In the burden of age there is blessing, and it is blessing in abundance.<sup>3</sup>

I share it with you to remind you but defining age is very complex. You might say that we contain within us several ages? We all have a birth age. Perhaps some of you might have an ideal age? I wonder what age, you feel inside, and I wonder further what age others see you as. Perhaps we contain several ages within our frames and hearts and souls and minds. Part of the truth of age is that it is challenging to define. It shifts and changes! Some of embrace it and others resist its truth.

In 1959 John Freeman, the famous BBC man, interviewed Carl Gustav Jung – he was an old man, 84 and this interview took place two years before his death

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<sup>3</sup> See my book Valuing Age: Pastoral Ministry with Older People SPCK 2008

in 1961. Jung was still working and his mind sharp, his concentration focussed. Here is an extract from the transcript:

Freeman 'you have told us that we should regard death as the only goal'

Jung 'yes'

Freeman 'and to shrink away from it is to evade life and to make life purposeless'

Jung 'yes'

Freeman 'what advice would you give to people in later life to enable them to do this...?'

Jung ' I have treated many old people and it is quite interesting to watch what the unconscious is doing with the fact that it is apparently threatened with a complete end. It disregards it – life behaves as if it were going on, and I think it better for old people to live on – to look forward to the next day, as if it had to spend centuries, and then he lives properly. But when he is afraid, he doesn't look forward, he looks back, he petrifies, he gets stiff and dies before his time; but when he is living on, looking forward to the great adventure that is ahead, then he lives ...'<sup>4</sup>

Jung invites us into considering the truth of age as inhabiting life in all its fullness and particularly in older age. It is and might be within this framework a time of harvest, of adventure and blessing

Consider the life experience in this Chapel - all the mistakes we have made, the difference we have affected through our relationships, the unpredictable moments of connecting, our writing and thinking. If Freeman asked what you believed you would give to older people in later life how would you have

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<sup>4</sup> Face to Face with John Freeman BBC Books 1989

replied? What do we need, or what truth do we need to grasp, as we grow older in order (in Jung's words) to live properly.

So, one truth question is to ask you how your faith helps you embrace both the challenges and opportunities and truth of age. For myself, I am, of course, like you a creature limited by time, circumstance, work role, gender, class, education, colour and faith. I limit myself by my own choices and preferences. I think I think that I am not a fanatic! I regard myself as liberal, progressive, serious, playful, tolerant of diversity and enriched by modernity – perhaps more energised by the atheist than the priest setting out norms and absolutes. That part of my truth – what about yours? What shape has age taken in you? What are the tasks of your older age ?

For us to explore the truth of Older Age we might need to ask the rather blunt question: What are older people for? What is our purpose and goal? That emerges from those words of Jung. I want to offer some theological scaffolding that might hold our on-going spiritual quest.

At this point I do not underestimate the problems of theology. The dominant protestant culture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, impelled by perfectionism in spiritual and physical matters and the belief in the power of the individual will, dichotomised and rationalised experience to control it. These pressures to master old age rather than accept it, generated a rigid dualism: anyone who lived a life of hard work, faith and self-discipline could preserve health and independence into a ripe old age which would be followed by a quick, painless, natural death. Only the shiftless, faithless and promiscuous were doomed to premature death or a miserable old age. Added to this the influence of individualism, materialism and consumerism then one is faced with a serious difficulty in redefining truth in older age. We cannot manage the second half of life through the uncritical pursuit of our own liberal individualism.

Those who contemplate ageing must also befriend death. In this attention there is potential for spiritual growth. Older people then must live with the unsettling truth in the space between being and doing. This reverberates profoundly in all our lives. In this truth we need to work for a new vision for a covenant between the generations. There is much wisdom to share across the ages. Is it possible to map out new metaphors and paradigms of human life and community? <sup>5</sup>

Older people need redemption as much as younger people. If this is true, then questions of sin and judgement should find a place in any sense of a goal of ageing as well as wellbeing for the self. Put another way, in old age, as through the rest of the life space, humans are called to serve God and not the self. Simply to be is not enough; being does not supplant doing in later life.

In the truth of naming or reimagining of older age, we might want to renew our commitment to the importance of the integrative power of metaphor and story. We do not live only by soundbite and the tempting shallowness of the media and attempts to show us truth. We Anglicans dig deeper. We should be unafraid of the truth that stories reveal. We live by story. We understand paradox, contradiction and incongruity. Truths are shared in the embodied lives of our neighbours. We know how to embrace the truth of attentiveness to the rich convergence of multiple points of view.

We need stories of growing older, stories of transformation, self-transcendence, humility and wisdom not limited by a denial or physical decline and mortality. We need communities capable of hearing these stories, capable of viewing these time travellers not as fearfully, alien old strangers but as

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<sup>5</sup> Loving Later Life : an ethics of ageing Frits de Lange Eerdmans 2015

pilgrims, children of hope and truth. We need to revalue ageing, to embrace the ageing body as a sacred space.

We need the books that flow from lived older lives. Christians, need the stories (and metaphors that flow from these) that reflect both the hope and the gift that are present in those narratives. In this we hold out for the truth of redefining the second half of life as a moral and spiritual category, not primarily a biological or psychological one.

It is interesting to ask how many individuals, particularly younger individuals, regard old age as a culmination of living – a highpoint. Consider this reflection by the theologian Karl Rahner ‘the real high point of my life is still to come. I mean the abyss of the mystery of God, into which one lets oneself fall in complete confidence of being caught up by God’s love and mercy forever’.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge here is that it appears that technological society so insulates modern day people from the contingency of human life that they come to lose the capacity for wonder that moved earlier generations to search for God and surrender in worship.

There seems to be very little space in this technological world where humans do not seem supremely in control. It may be for this reason, our sense for primal religious experience has been dulled. These are moments in which the intuition arises that human beings participate in a vast, complex world not of their making and one in which we play an exceedingly minor role but in which we are nonetheless highly and infinitely valued.

We know the truth (at one level) that old age brings one face to face with mortality. We should also remind ourselves that the religious virtues of old age

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, S.J., “The Experience of God Today” in *Theological Investigations XI*, New York: Seabury Press, 1974, p. 159.

are of a more subtle and intimate nature. As we grow older, we experience, at a whole number of different levels, a succession of transitions and crisis that overtime force the tension to ultimate realities. In this sense the trajectory of ageing has changed. Traditional views of preparation for death as an essentially religious activity have generally regarded death as the end a process either of ageing or illness. However, ageing in contemporary times has been altered in that a relatively long period of active life is followed by another long period of declining health and disability for many older adults. This offers us some opportunity to deepen the nurturing of the precariousness and graciousness of human life. It is possible if we stop and ponder, we might sit with transcendence and awe. Burdens can hold some blessing, and wisdom and invite is into pondering a deeper embrace of truth.

It may then be possible to support the view that the process of diminishment, which is the inward experience of loss undergone in old age, awakens the soul to the giftedness of life and makes it receptive to grace. For us to accept our limitation and even more diminishments awakens a particular virtue of ageing that Erikson<sup>7</sup> calls wisdom and Ronald Blythe<sup>8</sup> the willingness to bless life in the face of one's own suffering and mortality.

Old age is haunted by twin fears: fear of abandonment and fear of dependence. From the point of view of Christian theology dependence in old age, whether it takes the form of reliance on family members or on professional helpers, is in an instance of the profound dependence of the heart of creative existence. When Christians confess their faith in the creed, they are declaring that all God's creatures are dependent on the divine goodness for their existence. All creatures owe their being to God. Their very existence, all that sustains them, everything that helps them flourish, all that they are and can be comes from

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<sup>7</sup> E Erickson Identity and the Life Cycle WW Norton 1980

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Blythe Akenfield Penguin 2005

God. The accumulation of losses persons suffers in old age, the deepening vulnerability advance ageing carries with it, opens the mind and heart to the sense of absolute dependence – the intuition of sheer gratuitousness, which discloses the mystery of their lives as creatures of God. Even at their most active, humans are still receiving and being made. The truth here is that existence is not in one's own hands.

So, what attention needs to be given to the way in which age is socially constructed in modern times. Although I do not regard myself as especially old, the reality of my age is that I am now much closer to my death date than my birth age. At the end of this month, I step back from 41 years of unbroken stipendiary ministry in the Church of England. I want to call it, not retirement but new season. I am curious about what this period of life for me will give birth to.

Certainly, the years do encumber us with wrinkles, sags and grey hair but we also must face our complicated, peculiar and distinctive histories. As we face our histories, we might ask ourselves the question of what kind of power we solve life's enigmas and complexities. What are the unresolved questions for you? How far will our own wisdom or life experience take us? Who will we turn to.

How ought we to grow old? Or what does it mean to grow old? How do we find a way of giving voice to the things that really matter?

This truth question is deeply theological. Truth is complex as all good lawyers know! As TS Elliot once remarked 'there are two kinds of problems in life'. One kind requires the question 'what are we going to do about it?' the other calls for different questions: What does it mean? How does one relate to it?

<sup>9</sup>The first kind of problem is like a puzzle to be solved with appropriate technical resources and pragmatic responses. The second kind of problem poses a deeper range of challenges, which no strategy, policy or technique will overcome.

Is it too much hope for that Christians can offer alternative understandings of the moral significance of growing old because the cross is not a symbol of the fragility of a virtuous life, it is not just a story but the ground of a reality that subsumes the stories that would tell; the cross of Jesus is the grace of God, it is the ground of our hope and it is the promise of deliverance.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.clarendonhousebooks.com/single-post/2016/11/21/the-words-of-t-s-eliot>