

7th after Trinity 2017

The gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ Our Lord.

We've been informed recently that after years of steady increase, age expectancy for both men and women is levelling off, at 79 and 82 respectively. The headline response to this seemed to be alarm and despondency...what's going wrong? And indeed, there are proper concerns about the influence of factors such as wealth and poverty, or postcode. Personal responses, I imagine, would vary. If someone is seven years old, let us say, or even as much as 45, the cut off point probably seems a very long way off. If you've survived beyond 82, you might be congratulating yourself. If you're in your mid-seventies, this news might, as they say, 'concentrate the mind'. The Psalmist, famously, proclaims that 'the days of our age are threescore years and ten; and though men be so strong that they come to fourscore years, yet is their strength then but labour and sorrow, so soon passeth it away and we are gone.' Some seem to enjoy being old, some to resent it, some to fear it, some to look forward to it. 'You're only the age you feel'. But of course there's a lot more to this than anyone's actual age...not least the state of our health...or whether we desperately want to live to see a grandchild...or even a great-grandchild...or to discover what the effects of Brexit actually turn out to be...we might long to complete some particular task...or we don't want our demise to cause sorrow or trouble for others. St Paul, you may remember, was much exercised in his mind about his own life or death: 'we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord', he wrote to the Corinthians (2 Cor 5.8). And to the Philippians; 'to me to live is Christ and to die is gain... my desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.' That's to say, he felt a conflict between what he saw as his mission to make Christ known, and his belief that it would be better to die and so be 'with the Lord'. The Psalmist might have been his inspiration (71.16), when he's asking, it seems, to be given strength to bear witness to God in old age: 'forsake me not O God in my old age when I am gray-headed, until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power unto all them that are yet for to come'. Like St Paul, this psalmist feels that there's more to be done.

On the whole, I suppose, human beings want to cling to life, although the continuing debate about the deliberate ending of life reminds us that there are no simple generalisations to be made. However, I have found myself wondering about reactions to the news of the levelling off of age expectancy. It's inevitable, and in many ways a good thing, that questions are asked about the reasons for this; but what St Paul saw as a conflict – I'd rather die and be with Christ, but perhaps I ought to hang on for the sake of the Christian mission – that conflict probably *wouldn't* be part of most public debates in our 21st century. But then doesn't St Paul himself suggest some sort of answer to his own internal debate, an answer on which a serious Christian should also reflect? In today's Epistle, St Paul tells his readers that 'the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ'. *Not*, that the gift of God is three score years and ten, or fourscore years, or even 100 years. *Not*, that the gift of God is freedom from all trouble and disease and accident. But, that the gift of God is life in Jesus Christ...as opposed to the death of sin. Now it's very true that St Paul was much concerned with life in Christ beyond the grave – see 1 Corinthians 15 - if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead? – and that life, freed from the limitations and travails of life on earth was clearly what he longed for – 'I'd rather die and be with Christ'. BUT, it's also clear that life in Christ, freedom from the death of sin, was in his thought for THIS life. Now is eternal life. NOW it is that you're made free from sin, now you are servants of God.

And earlier in the same chapter (part of last Sunday's epistle reading) 'like as Christ was raised from the dead, so we might walk in newness of life'. So here is another angle on the question of life expectancy...rather than debating how long it is desirable to live, we might ask: how far is our life, whatever our age, whatever our condition, how far is it a life being lived in Christ? I have an image of a life lived in Christ...of an elderly lady to whom I used to take Holy Communion during my second curacy...bedridden, she was, but her smile stays with me to this today. She was bedridden, but her life was hidden with Christ: hers was eternal life and she communicated that life to me...and not least as the Lord came to her in the blessed sacrament, as he brought sustenance to the crowds in today's gospel story...and as he comes to satisfy us with the bread of life, his life, in this Mass. The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus...to whom, with the Father...

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