

# The Christian Practice of Growing Old

## Session 2

### Welcome and Introduction

### Opening Prayer

### Recap first part of article

### Summary of second part of article

### Reflections on a Messiah who died young

Christians have looked to Jesus as the definitive model for a life lived faithfully. But Jesus did not experience older age; he died aged around 33-36. So what can we learn from Jesus in relation to growing old?

- **Jesus' death teaches 'fidelity is more important than longevity'.** Length of years seen as a blessing (Proverbs 16:31; 20:29) NB *Perhaps not always seen as a blessing to us?* But certainly should not presume to have 'right' to a long life.
- Call to discipleship, to be faithful, to witness to the truth, to trust God, not knowing what this will entail:  
*'Thus, Christians are taught by the example of Jesus that we do not have to live in a cautious mode of self-protection, clinging to our lives desperately at all costs, making an idol of our own physical survival. We are free to let go of our lives when the time comes, because we believe that God will vindicate us in the end.'*
- We do not know how long we will live, therefore *'we should live each moment of time in its fullness, whether we are nineteen or ninety'*. Can't control our lives. Need to see each day as a gift, looking to God for our daily bread. Not being anxious about tomorrow (Matthew 6: 25-34).
- **Jesus' suffering represents and redeems all human suffering.** Jesus fully God and fully human. Jesus' life and death takes on all human experience, not just that which he specifically experienced in his earthly life. *'In his suffering, death and resurrection, we are all mysteriously included: his experience absorbs ours and becomes the key to understanding our own experience'* This is true whether we are male/female, African/Chinese, young/old etc.
- Need to see our own lives and deaths through the 'lens' of Jesus' death and resurrection. See our own lives as grounded in the story of Jesus. Then we will find a commonality with others different from us. This challenges the current tendency to suppose we can *'share deep solidarity only with those who participate precisely in our own particular experience of culture, race, class, gender or adversity.'* (Identity politics).

- **Basic pattern we learn from Jesus: pattern of self-giving for the sake of others.** Jesus, the one who emptied himself, taking on form of a servant, obedient even to death for our sakes (Philippians 2).
- This pattern of self-giving for others is to form us throughout our lives, including as we grow old. *‘Old age is not a time simply to relax and play golf, nor is it a time only to reminisce about the past (Though relaxation and reminiscence surely have their rightful place in our lives.) But old age, as in the rest of our lives, still a time to keep serving others, following pattern of self giving. (NB... What exactly this means, what forms of service/self-giving are possible for us needs to be thought about.)*
- This pattern of self-giving service, following Christ challenges different attitudes towards aging that we might see in our society:
  1. Old people seen as helpless, useless burdens on society (*despair*)
  2. Or idea that old age is simply a time to sit back, relax, and enjoy all we’ve worked for (*self-indulgence*)

### **The Defeat of Death, the Last Enemy**

Bible shows little concern with *aging* as a problem, but *death* is viewed in a sober, realistic way as a *‘grim shadow cast over the world.’*

- In OT, often references to the fragility and transience of life (Psalm 90:9-10; Psalm 103:15-6). Death is a ‘shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations’ (Isaiah 25:7). Is a distant future hope that God will destroy this shroud and ‘swallow up death forever’ (Isaiah 25:8).
- In NT, even clearer that death is a great evil. Contrast Jesus’ attitude to his death as prays in Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42; Luke 22:44) with serene detachment of Socrates when facing his own death.
- NT writers do *not* see death as a smooth passage into a better world (as expressed in some sentimental poems read at funerals today). Paul calls death ‘the last enemy’ which remains to be destroyed by Christ in the last days. (1 Corinthians 15:26-8).
- NT writers answer to the problem of death: Jesus’ resurrection is the firstfruits of the final resurrection in which all Christ’s people will share. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28). A resurrection of the body at the last day (*which we affirm in the Creed*).
- The hope of resurrection shapes our understanding of aging as Christians.
- **First**, it reminds us of God’s faithfulness to creation – he will redeem what he has made. All creation groans for redemption along with us. (Romans 8:22-3). This includes ‘the redemption of our bodies’, NOT redemption *from* our bodies. This belief should lead us to respect and honour the physical body, in life and in death. The body matters.

- **Second**, we are set free from fear of death (Hebrews 2:14-15). As we grow old, face death in and with Christ. No need therefore to *'deceive ourselves with costly amusements that distract us from the truth of our mortality'* NOR to frantically try to forestall death at all costs. Rather the practice of growing old *'can be characterized by a sober confidence.'*
- As Christians we are a people who have been 'trained to die' through reflecting week after week on the story of the cross and resurrection. 'Our identity is grounded in the crucified Messiah who has gone before us through death and resurrection.' (*Topic for another time – what is a good death? How can we die well? Preparing for death was v important*)

### **Conclusion: how can our attitude to aging be shaped by scripture?**

- Note similarity, rather than difference, between elderly and younger Christians. We are all called to be followers of Jesus, drawn into his life story.
- Christians who reach old age have a special responsibility to lead, teach and counsel others. Those who are physically incapable and without family need to be cared for by the church. But in the midst of weakness and illness *'their ministry of example may intensify'*.
- In late life Christians need still to be open to their lives being turned upside down. They may be called to a new ministry.
- At all ages we are to take the Lord Jesus as our model for daily life and interactions with others. Those who are older have had more practice! So hopefully they will embrace hope more fully. *'Their confidence is not a natural fruit or reward of age itself, rather it is a consequence of practice.'* Not automatic that as we get older we become more confident and hopeful! *'The Christian practice of growing old is a lifelong habit of believing God's witness in the Scriptures and acting on it, for as long as God gives life.'*

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Hays mentions two different reactions to aging in our society: believing we are useless (despair), and believing older age is about leisure and enjoyment (self-indulgence). How can we encourage one another to avoid these two extremes and to maintain in older age the pattern of self-giving and service, following the model of Christ?
2. How does the story of Jesus' death and resurrection affect your own attitude to death?
3. *'The Christian practice of growing old is a lifelong habit of believing God's witness in the Scriptures and acting on it, for as long as God gives life.'* How can we encourage one another to develop this lifelong habit?