

Editorial: Valued, Wanted, Needed

On taking my pet cat for his annual inoculation in July past, I was slightly taken aback by the young vet's first comment: 'He's quite old, isn't he?' My initial indignation quickly dispersed as I realised, despite Honey's spark and vitality, at 15 years of age, he is 'quite old!' Growing up we may have had a favourite actor, musician, or sports star, and 'freeze framed' an image of them from that time. Then we see them on a TV programme in the here and now, and we think, 'Oh, is that how they look today?!' Ask a child what their age is, and you may receive an answer like '7¾' – as children we can't wait to be older, and to be grown up. Fast forward a few decades - if someone guesstimates our age at five or ten years below our actual age, they're our friend for life! This summer I took a trip to Canada with strong similarities to a trip I'd made back in 1995. I discovered my energy levels weren't quite what they were 27 ago, at just half my present age. Growing older is a reality that can seemingly creep up on and surprise us. A well-meaning friend was visiting my late uncle Willie (in his early 80s) in hospital after a fall. Suggesting he might get one of those alarm call necklaces, she was somewhat amused by his response – 'What! Sure those are for *old people!*' Many will recognise that growing old is a privilege that not all live to see. Yet, to some, becoming older can feel like a badge of dishonour, to be worn only with much reluctance. As with every topic of importance, the Bible has wise, instructive, and encouraging counsel on the issue of growing older, from which we may glean.

As people grow older, this brings **CHALLENGES** for the individual, for the Church, and even for those who may be several decades younger.

In my poem, 'Indiscriminate Love', I penned the lines: 'There's no refusal on grounds of age, disability / Or ill health with the God of equal opportunities'. In the book of Joshua, we read of the faith-filled actions of Caleb, aged 40, who wholly followed the Lord. Forty-five years later, he was still faithfully serving the Lord (Josh 14:7-14). Noah was 600 years old when he and, through his godly influence, his whole family entered into the ark he had built, having fully obeyed all God had instructed him to do (Gen 6:13-7:6). Of course, people no longer live to 600 years old, but the principle is clear – the happiness God's blessing brings, and our usefulness in His service, extend to all ages in our lives, and are not restricted to our youth only. '*They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing*' (Ps 92:14). Yet the physical decline that often accompanies ageing can be frustrating and discouraging. Never forget, dear reader, whilst you are alive on this earth, God has you here for a reason – you are valued, wanted and needed. I have known people who sadly are unable to leave the house often now – but who yet have a fruitful ministry in terms of writing letters, phoning other shut-ins, giving, encouraging those in full-time ministry and, vitally, through prayer.

In church circles, those serving in key roles generally may reach a point where, due to the realities of ageing, they must step back from what might be termed 'front line service'. Within the CSCU NI, at times groups may have ceased meeting because a group leader retired and no-one else was available to carry on leading the meetings. The same applies in many areas of Christian service and witness. Whilst the words in Ezekiel 22:30 relate to the need for men and women to engage in intercessory prayer, I feel they can have a wider application too: '*And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none.*' Could YOU be the person who 'stands in the gap' in some church or CSCU situation? You could be the difference between a work being given up - or being carried on - and a witness continuing, rather than concluding.

In teenage years, when we met someone of mature years, possibly slower in speech and gait, and not into the 'cool things' we were, there may have been a temptation to wrongly think 'What do they know?' The short answer is – a lot! British Prime Ministers (PMs) are afforded the privilege of a weekly audience with the Monarch, the contents of those discussions remaining within those four walls. At the time of HM Queen Elizabeth II's passing, it was commented upon that future PMs would no longer be able to draw from the wealth of wisdom and insights she had amassed during a lengthy reign, and dealings with no fewer than 15 PMs. With age comes maturity, experience, and insights - things that you simply don't have just starting out in life. Wise men learn from their mistakes – wiser men learn from the mistakes of others! (Prov 11:14) It is so worth your while to talk to your parents, grandparents and 'senior statesmen - and stateswomen' in your life. I am so glad my mum shared with me stories of how she and Dad had proved God in the difficult times, and such knowledge helped 'arm' me when I, too, faced such struggles (Deut 11:18-20).

The **CERTAINTY** as we grow older. Whether we be 8, 18 or 88, there is one discomfiting reality we all must grasp – one day we must all die. The human body, though resilient, is yet fragile. Life is uncertain and, through accident, illness or the violent action of another, death can come suddenly, shockingly, and when least expected. David spoke these sombre words: '*... there is but a step between me and death.*' (1 Sam 20:3) How essential it is for every one of us to heed the Bible's counsel: '*O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!*' (Deut 32:2) and to '*prepare to meet thy God.*' (Amos 4:4) Death is described as '*the last enemy*' (1 Cori 15:26) - and it is an enemy. Yet, through Jesus' death on the cross and glorious resurrection, death is now a defeated foe (1 Cor 15:55). When we trust and know the One who holds the keys of death and of hell (Rev 1:18), we will equally find that He delivers us from the fear of death (Heb 2:14-15). We can never have *certainty* on when we will die, but we can yet have strong *confidence* and a real peace in facing death, whenever it may happen.

The **COMFORT** as we grow older. We live in a disposable society where, if something isn't working or pleasing us as it once did - be it a household product or a marriage - folks may simply ditch it and seek a replacement. Those who have reached a certain stage in life can find they are sidelined, unwanted, or viewed as 'past their sell by date'. How different things are with the God we love and serve. Jesus has promised to be with us always (Matt 28:20) and to never leave nor forsake us (Heb 13:6). He is a '*friend that sticketh closer than a brother*' (Prov 18:24) and '*the same yesterday, and today, and forever.*' (Heb 13:8). What a comfort in a world that seems to change by the day. I have always loved this promise in Is 46:4 – '*And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar [grey] hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.*' The world around us may let us down, but God won't. Listen to these stirring testimonies from Joshua and David, just two men who had proved this: '*... Not one thing hath failed of all the good things which the LORD your God spake concerning you; all are come to pass ...*' '*I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.*' Is it any wonder the beloved Psalmist could boldly assert '*For this God is our God for ever and ever: he will be our guide even unto death.*' and '*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*' (Ps 48:14 & 23:6) What wonderful comfort and reassurance we have!

'Forever young – I want to be forever young' – so went the yearning chorus of a long forgotten '80s pop song I heard on an aeroplane this past summer. The songwriter acknowledged in the second verse 'we don't have the power' (to remain young). A different songwriter from two decades earlier had a more realistic view: 'We may not be the young ones very long.' My late mum died aged 89, and though thanking God for her 89 years, I recall her saying her 89 years didn't seem that long looking back. It can be hard watching our loved ones struggle with the challenges that old age can bring, especially as they

increasingly become unable to do so many of the things they previously loved doing. But, for the Christian, the aches, pains and decline that can accompany old age can but make them long for heaven – rightly described in the chorus as that ‘land where we’ll never grow old.’ What a prospect – a place of no pain or suffering, where bodies will no longer wear out or break down, and where we’ll enjoy the vigour and bloom of everlasting health. For each soul who has trusted Christ, we have His promise: *‘I go to prepare a place for you.’* (John 14:2) If you haven’t already done so, won’t you make the necessary preparation this very day, that you too may reach that place of which it is written: *‘And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.’* (Rev 21:4) Even should our ‘glory days’ be past, in a wonderful sense our greatest ‘glory days’ still lie ahead, when we know Jesus Christ as Saviour (Rom 8:18).