

Luke 2: 25 – 38. Old people

The cartoon showed a man staggering out of a shop under the weight of the cases of wine and bottles of malt he was laying in for the festivities. “Only a couple of days to Christmas,” he was saying. “Of course, it’s really a time for the kids”. Christmas is for the children as the tv adverts put pressure on hard-pressed parents to buy more and more extravagant toys for toddlers whose real interests are in tearing open wrapping paper. Christmas is for the children say the film makers as each December they try to find the right blend of sentimentality and fantasy to sell the cinema tickets. And what does the Bible say? The Bible says Christmas is for old people.

The first Christmas story in the Bible is in Matthew’s gospel. His story is about wise men travelling from the East to Bethlehem. They are mysterious figures: we know nothing about them. But they are not likely to be boys. Ancient civilisations venerated the wisdom of the elderly. We can assume that Matthew’s Christmas story is about old people coming to Bethlehem to worship Jesus.

Luke’s story is even more clear. It begins with an old couple. Do you remember the story of the birth of John the Baptist with which Luke begins? Mary’s old cousin Elizabeth, and Elizabeth’s old husband Zechariah rejoice at the news of the birth of their longed-for son after she was well past child-bearing age. The announcing of good news to these two old people is placed at the beginning of Luke’s Christmas story. Then Jesus is born at Bethlehem. And then the story ends with two other old people. We read about them this morning. Their names were Simeon and Anna: Luke’s Christmas story ends with these two praising God that each of them has heard and seen the good news of the birth of Jesus. It cannot be an accident that St Luke tells the Christmas story in the context of two pairs of old people who discover that Christmas is for them. For the Bible, Christmas is for old people.

Could the message be that Christmas is for old people because they have been disappointed more than most? There will be people here in church who could give anyone lessons in disappointment. A friend of my grandmother once pointed across the street to her husband and said "Do you see that man? There goes the laziest lout in this town. Other people may have a dead sorrow. I have a living sorrow". She clearly felt that her life had been one long disappointment, repeated over and over again. Maybe a family member, maybe employment opportunities, maybe an addiction that has never been overcome. There are others here today who just get over on kind of disappointment when something quite different slaps them in the face. You are still struggling with a bereavement when a bank collapses and the pension you depend on is cut in half. And then something else. And then something else.

Old people have had more of this stuff. Old people have been disappointed more than most. Maybe that is why they need Christmas. Maybe that is why Christmas is for them. I don't so much mean Christmas Day itself, which is often a real struggle for many old people. I valued the experience I had for the first time two weeks ago when I took part in a "Blue Christmas Service" here at Morningside. But when I say Christmas is for old people because they have been disappointed more than most I mean the reality of Christmas, the presence of God among us, the Word made flesh. As a modern bible translation puts it "The Word became flesh and blood and moved into our neighbourhood". Christmas is for disappointed people because the love of God is for disappointed people.

Yes, the love of God is for everyone, but especially for disappointed people. Don't you ever think that the experience of Jesus living among us was in some ways a life of disappointment? The crowds who came to hear him faded away and turned their back on his message; all his twelve closest friends deserted him; on the cross he cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" God lives among us in disappointment and at Christmas the love of God looked down and crept in beside disappointed people.

Or could it be that Christmas is for old people because old people are more aware than most that they are going to die? A minister said to me recently that he was finding it more and more difficult to conduct funerals because he was increasingly conscious of his own mortality. It is one of the marks of leaving childhood behind that you realise that you are going to die. But the older you are the more that becomes real for you. Most of us develop ways of ignoring our own mortality, so that for most of us the moment a doctor spells out a terminal diagnosis is an unrepeatable shock. But in general older people are more aware that they are going to die.

The American cyclist Lance Armstrong was one of the most successful sportsmen ever, until he was unmasked as a drug-taker and a cheat. At the height of his success he was diagnosed with cancer. In his autobiography he wrote this about his reaction

The night before brain surgery, I thought about death. I searched out my larger values, and I asked myself, if I was going to die, did I want to do it fighting and clawing or in peaceful surrender? I believed in belief, for its own shining sake. To believe in the face of utter hopelessness, every article of evidence to the contrary, to ignore apparent catastrophe--what other choice was there? To continue believing in yourself, believing in the doctors, believing in the treatment, believing in whatever I chose to believe in, that was the most important thing, I decided. It had to be. Without belief, we would be left with nothing but an overwhelming doom, every single day. And it will beat you.

Armstrong was a cheat, and he's not a deep thinker, but his words will ring true for many people for all that. Which is why Christmas is for those who are aware that they are going to die. For the invitation of Christmas is not just to believe in, as Armstrong said "Whatever I chose to believe in", but to believe in God.

Christmas is for people aware of their mortality because at Christmas it is God who comes among us and promises that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never be able to put it out. Christmas is for people aware of their own mortality because at Christmas it is God who comes

among us and says "I am the resurrection and the life". Christmas is for people aware of their own mortality because at Christmas it is God who comes among us and lives our own life and suffers death himself and on the third day staggers out of the tomb bearing on his body the marks of the victory over death which has been won for us. The poet John Donne wrote *One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

Christmas is for those who fear death because the love of God is for those who fear death and at Christmas the love of God looked down and crept in beside those very people.

St Luke begins his Christmas story with two old people, Elizabeth and Zechariah; and he ends it with two old people, Simeon and Anna. He thinks Christmas is for old people. Yes, Christmas is for everyone, but Christmas is for old people. So, if you are my age or beyond, take heart.

Yes, take heart. Like the old man Ulysses, in a poem by Tennyson. The old warrior king, looking back on his life and taking heart. Looking back in his old age, but refusing to give up. Here are the last lines of the poem *tho'*

*We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*